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**DISLOCATION AND THE ENEMY COMMANDER**

Core Course 5602 Essay

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## INTRODUCTION

“Mystify, mislead, and surprise”

Stonewall Jackson

Jackson's reported motto<sup>1</sup> provides a succinct and independent statement of the principles of the indirect approach in military strategy as propounded by Liddell Hart and Sun Tzu. According to Liddell Hart, the physical and psychological dislocation of the enemy is the primary aim of strategy<sup>2</sup>; the processes of mystifying and misleading the enemy provide distraction, and it is such distraction that provides both a foundation and amplification of effect for the unexpected “surprise” that is the signature of the indirect approach.

Liddell Hart is quite specific that the psychological dislocation -- the confusion, the fears, the increased sense of Clausewitzian friction -- of the enemy commander is of particular benefit to the practitioner of the indirect approach. Sun Tzu, in his ancient writings, explicitly recognizes the benefits of instilling doubts and confusion in the mind of the enemy, going so far as to maintain that the *primary target* of the superior commander is precisely the *mind* of the opposing commander.<sup>3</sup>

Both the civilian and the military professional can appreciate the elegance of an indirect and unexpected attack and the apparent brilliance of the commander that achieves surprise, and can imagine the confusion that runs through the mind of an enemy commander struggling to cope with a new and unanticipated set of circumstances. At the same time, one can only shake

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in B. A. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967; Penguin Books, 1991), 328.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel B. Griffith, in “Introduction” to *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 40.

his or her head over past follies of some commanders who continued to pursue -- perhaps even obsessively -- a doctrinaire offense despite clear empirical evidence of the inadequacies or even counter-productive nature of one or another outdated strategies

The disorientation of a surprised commander under attack and the unwarranted persistence of other commanders in continuing to press discredited strategies may have their bases in the same psychological phenomena. This essay will examine the impact of dislocation and fixation in terms of the theory of cognitive dissonance, and suggest that an awareness of this theory has real relevance to the commander of today

### DISLOCATION

"Dislocation" is the term used by Liddell Hart to describe the situation of an enemy commander subjected to an attack from an unforeseen quarter or against an unanticipated target, i.e., an attack that does not confront the defender's military center of gravity (Comment: Attacks utilizing new tactics, or at an unexpected time, can also result in the physical or psychological dislocation of the enemy commander, but such attacks are not necessarily part of "the indirect approach") Liddell Hart's use of the term "dislocation" has its origins in the physical effects on the defender's strategic position as a result of an attack using the indirect approach. That is, the requirement to respond to the sudden opening of a new front will require repositioning and reorganization of the defender's forces to face the new threat, the defender may be required to separate his forces, his supply lines may be endangered, and his routes of retreat may be threatened, in short, the defender's forces are no longer in the "right" locations, and have been dislocated not by a move of the troops from their absolute positions but by expanding the area of conflict and thus changing their relative positions. The dislocation effect is not just limited to the disposition of physical forces. Just as redeployment of troops is indicated, the defender must reorganize and reformulate his strategic concept since both his troops and his mind have been concentrating on another area or location. The commander's rethinking of strategy, however, is complicated by immediate feelings of fear, a fear of being

trapped if he maintains his previously proposed course of action, and a fear of being trapped through action on some other front if he responds to the indirect approach <sup>4</sup> Since one's location is defined by one or more points of reference, losing these points of reference (in this case, assumptions about the enemy's planned course of attack) causes one to become psychologically "dislocated." In this case, the indirect approach has satisfied Sun Tzu's prime directive. the mind of the enemy commander, his plan for the conduct of the conflict, has been attacked

### **The Power of Surprise**

In most campaigns, the dislocation of the enemy's psychological and physical balance has been the vital prelude to a successful attempt at his overthrow <sup>5</sup>

Liddell Hart's theory regarding the advantages of the indirect approach is supported by his analysis of past campaigns and wars. While he has been criticized for being overly selective in his selection of campaigns for analysis, with some believing that his individual cases were selected to support a thesis already born in the trenches of World War I, there is no doubt that a substantial body of evidence exists that indirect approaches, with their shock value, have been successful in many cases.

The optimal psychological effect of dislocation is paralysis caused by sheer nerve shock <sup>6</sup>. The paralysis is not necessarily total or permanent, but can be counted as successful if it delays a response long enough to allow the initiator to either secure his position or (after damage or destruction of a target) withdraw his troops.

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<sup>4</sup>Liddell Hart, 326-327

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 6

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 345

An excellent example of such dislocation resulted from the Allied invasion of Normandy in World War II. It was an article of faith with the German High Command -- or at least Hitler -- that the Allied invasion would logically (from the German point of view) take place at the narrowest portion of the English Channel. As a result, the heaviest Nazi fortifications were concentrated in the Pas de Calais area. So strongly held was the belief in an attack at this point that command authorities refused to release Panzer forces to Normandy until beachheads -- of what the Germans thought were only diversionary forces -- were well established. By taking the "path of least expectations," the Allies were able to successfully "attack their enemy's plan."

Although the invasion ultimately spelled defeat for Germany, the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941 benefited from Soviet dislocation. Not only was the attack a surprise to Stalin -- after all, he had a Peace Pact with Hitler -- but the three-pronged Nazi attack was not directed against the center of gravity of the Soviet military mass. With the pressure to cope with the unexpected, and the German refusal to engage in a decisive battle with a concentrated Red Army, Russian Generals were unable -- at least until General Winter came to their aid -- to cope with the rapid German advance across the plains. Soviet plans had simply become unstuck.

The object of an indirect approach, then, appears in large part to disrupt the enemy's ability to cope -- to force him to exercise his OODA loop outside a valid conceptual framework of assumptions and doctrine, with no fixed points of reference. Thus the indirect approach frustrates the enemy's plans, serving to isolate and demoralize him, and consequently (and theoretically, at least) sapping his will to resist.<sup>7</sup>

Liddell Hart and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Sun Tzu concentrated on actions a commander could take to dislocate the enemy. By the same standards of what constitutes dislocation, however, perhaps an argument can be made that the proponent of the direct approach, particularly one that has not realized that the context of the war and/or battle has changed, can be the instrument of his own dislocation.

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<sup>7</sup>Griffith, 39

## **The Futility of Fixation**

Starting with Gettysburg, numerous examples can be cited of commanders that managed to dislocate themselves in pursuit of the direct approach. At Gettysburg, Lee spurned suggestions to switch to maneuver tactics and persisted in ordering assaults on well-defended Union positions. Doctrine, past experience, and Lee's perception of circumstances indicated that a direct attack on the main force of the Union Army was the path to a better peace. After all, the Union had never stood up to a pitched battle against Lee, a war of attrition would favor the Union side, and morale was high among Southern troops. The General failed, however, to fully consider that the Union was defending home territory and that U S troops were under a new General, nor had he apparently fully considered that the rifled musket and exploding shot had profoundly changed the field of battle. As a result, the Army of Northern Virginia was badly bloodied and was never able to regain the initiative.

Fifty years later, European armies persisted in frontal assaults against the massed and entrenched forces. Victories have only been won, the commanders knew, by destroying the enemy, as such, one is obligated to engage the foe -- if the foe is entrenched, then you must attack him in his trenches. As a result, the world saw the futility and horror of the Somme and Ypres. Why? The commanders' frames of reference demanded an attack, their frames of reference, though, had remained constant while the real world had changed producing profound dislocation.

Many more examples of successes of the indirect approach (such as MacArthur's Inchon landing, the VC's Tet Offensive, or the invasion of Iraq rather than Kuwait as the Desert Storm strategy) and failures of the direct approach (Hitler's drive on Stalingrad, MacArthur's proposal to carry the Korean War to China) can be cited. With the benefit of hindsight, though, we have to ask ourselves "Why didn't the victims of the indirect approach see it coming? If an indirect approach is the most logical, shouldn't that be what one is expecting? And furthermore, why did some commanders persist in the direct approach when all it gained were unacceptable casualties on their side?" The answer lies, perhaps, in a universal human characteristic

## THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Man's intellectual advancement has been described as a continuing search for order. We demand reasons -- or in the absence of reasons, explanations. This drive to detect some order in the Universe is observable in the youngest (what parent has not gone through the "Why?" stage with a toddler?), the wisest (what is science but a search for the natural laws that serve as organizing principles for the physical universe?), the most thoughtful (as philosophers grapple with the concept of meaning), the most spiritual (with religion and theology providing us with a frame of reference to relate to the universal imponderables), and the most sensitive (as literature and the arts seek to express abstractions of human relationships with each other and nature). Our apparent fundamental need for a sense of order, then, is satisfied (or at least appeased) by cognitions of theories, laws, beliefs, and articles of faith, and not purely or perhaps even primarily by our own unexamined experiences.

In his 1957 work, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, psychologist Leon Festinger advanced the hypothesis that humans are strongly motivated to maintain consistency (or consonance) among related beliefs and/or abstracted experiences.<sup>8</sup> Failure to do so, Festinger said, would produce "symptoms of psychological discomfort," and since rational human beings seek to avoid discomfort, some action is necessary to either avoid or resolve such conflicts.

A number of strategies are available to help maintain consistency and reduce dissonance. One can alter one's beliefs to match new experiential data, one may seek out and add new information which helps reaffirm the dissonant cognition, or one may mentally reduce the perceived importance of the dissonance ("Oh, well, this recent experience is an anomaly"). The first two of these strategies would intuitively appear to be those of the rational actor. However, changing one's beliefs (or theories, or articles of faith) is a wrenching experience -- a

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<sup>8</sup>J B Campbell, "Cognitive Dissonance" in *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2d ed., ed. Raymond J Corsini (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), 249.



discomforting admission that “I’ve been wrong all along.” If we accept the premise that humans seek to avoid pain, then we can speculate that the coping strategies that require a change in beliefs or theories are inherently less attractive.

This reluctance to change beliefs or fundamentally alter theories has been examined for a class of people normally considered our most rational actors -- the international scientific community. In his seminal and still highly influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn noted that, “Scientists do not renounce the paradigm that has led them into a crisis” (of dissonance) even when confronted by even severe and prolonged anomalies.<sup>9</sup> It seems we are driven to hold on to what we “know,” to our structure of cognitions that gives some sense of order to events. According to Kuhn, scientists at least maintain and defend the theoretical framework of their discipline, expanding it and branching it with exceptions and special “minor” theories until the whole structure collapses (i.e., is “dislocated”) to be eventually replaced by a simpler, more realistic, and more coherent unified theory or sets of theories.

The fact that scientists, the “priests of reason,” are so reluctant to change their beliefs is only one of the paradoxes associated with cognitive dissonance. Perhaps the most significant paradox is that beliefs (or theories, or even perhaps strategies) are most likely to change when the dissonant experience is just barely dissonant enough to justify (to an imaginary rational actor) the change in beliefs. According to Festinger’s theory, this is because the discomfort of being “wrong” is minimized by implicitly accepting the theoretical weakness of the belief structure (i.e., “It wasn’t very well thought out anyway”). Greater dissonance -- say that produced when entire generations from England, France, and Germany are exterminated by theoretically essential (according to the theories of the time) but objectively meaningless offensives across No Man’s Land -- appears to reinforce the continued acceptance of an invalid belief structure, perhaps because we have a very difficult time accepting being so very wrong.

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<sup>9</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed., Vol. II, No. 2, *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 77.

## CONCLUSION

Psychological dislocation of the enemy commander is a prime objective of the "indirect approach" described by Sun Tzu and Liddell Hart. Indeed, the enemy commander's mind and plans are held to be the most important strategic military targets. A military strategy of following the "line of least expectations" results in surprise of the enemy commander, and is almost certain to produce physical dislocation of his forces. It is also likely to produce psychological dislocation of the enemy's strategy as the enemy commander realizes that his forces are in the wrong place at the wrong time. The additional stress of having to redeploy forces at a time of maximum uncertainty has the potential of producing intellectual paralysis of the enemy at best, and at worst an increase in the friction experienced by the enemy's forces.

Psychological dislocation of the enemy commander leading to generation and implementation of operations not justified by any rational strategic framework may also be self-induced, where the enemy continues to employ the principles and theories of strategy that he knows regardless of any changed context and any empirical demonstration of the poverty of those principles and theories.

Both of these causes of psychological dislocation of the enemy commander-- that brought about by the surprise and fear generated by the unexpected thrusts of the indirect approach and that self-generated by application of no-longer-appropriate but familiar strategies -- can be put in context with the theory of cognitive dissonance. If the dissonance between reality and theoretically expected results is too great, either due to surprise or the failure of theory, the enemy commander may simply be unable to cope.

What is the relevance of the psychological dislocation and cognitive dissonance to today's military strategists? Most theoreticians of strategy -- at least those emphasized in the core curriculum of the National War College -- emphasize offensive operations. Such operations may be a response to the initial aggression of the enemy, and may be designed to protect the homeland or other vital interests, but in any case involve the exercise of initiative in carrying the

conflict to the enemy. Under such circumstances, the potential psychological paralysis or collapse of critical abilities, for whatever reason, is a pretty weak reed on which to base your strategy. True, there are other advantages to the indirect approach, but these may be at least partially balanced by the possibility that the enemy commander has already incorporated the current context into his strategic thinking. While the potential for psychological dislocation of the enemy may be great, it is by no means assured.

Why, then, consider these issues? Because in any conflict, there are at least two enemy commanders. Your enemy, and your enemy's enemy -- you. While the details of an effective strategy are unique to the political and military objectives and the geographic, economic, military, and human resources of each of the antagonists, the same structural framework for strategy generation is applicable to both. If the indirect approach can produce dislocation for the enemy, his indirect approach may produce your own dislocation. If his forces are disadvantaged by his dogged application of an outdated paradigm, your forces may also be disadvantaged by your failure to properly appreciate the current context and feasibility of your strategic principals.

An essential element of a prudent defense is, and will be, an objective evaluation of our own strategic vulnerabilities -- where would you attack if you were the enemy with his resources and objectives? A second essential element of strategy is the continuing evaluation of the validity of your assumptions, theories, and principles with a hard-headed realization that we don't want to believe our own bad news.

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